

Colonial Meetinghouses of New England

Background Information About Colonial Meetinghouses

What is a colonial meetinghouse?

It's a structure that meets the following 2 criteria:

- It was built at tax payer expense (except in Rhode Island), and
- It was used for both religious worship and town business.

Early English settlers came to America for religious freedom from the Church of England. The Puritans, as they were called, set up a society that was free of the ornate, rigid traditions of the Anglo-Catholic church. However, the Puritans also established a religious order that was equally rigid. In America, there was religious freedom as long as you were a Puritan!



The central focus of every New England town was the meetinghouse. These structures were typically financed through taxation, and were usually the largest building in the town. They were used both for religious worship, and for conducting town business. They were always very simple buildings, with no statues, decorations, or stained glass. Not even a cross hung on the wall. After all, before they left, the Puritans broke all of the stained glass in the cathedrals in England!

Most of the meetinghouses included in this project were built in the late 1700s by the descendants of the Puritans, who came to America to get away from the Church of England. Some, especially in Rhode Island, were built by Baptists, who founded Rhode Island to get away from the Puritans. A few of the meetinghouses were actually built by Anglicans (members of the Church of England) who settled here too. Towns were originally settled by people of one religion, and so it was natural to support the church by taxation.

The origin of the town meeting form of government, still prevalent in New England today, can be traced to meetinghouses of the colonies.

The practice of supporting the church with tax money continued until about 1820, when individual states passed laws separating church and state. Until that time, it was common (except in Rhode Island) to support the dominant church - referred to as the "standing order" - by taxing the citizens. In fact, in the early years a town was not granted a charter until it had built a meetinghouse and hired a minister. Rhode Island did not support the church with taxes because it was founded by the Baptists who were expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for refusing to pay the church tax.

The meetinghouses included in this project were generally built in the last half of the 1700s. The style of many of them is remarkably similar, considering the great distances between towns, and the time it took to travel by horseback. Most were almost square, with a rather steep pitched roof running east to west. This placed the long wall toward the south for better light, and warmth in the winter. These buildings were never heated for fear of fire. There were typically 3 doors: The one in the center of the long south wall was called the "Door of Honor," and was used by the minister and his family, and any honored out-of-town guests. The other doors were located in the middle of the east and west walls, and were used by women and men, respectively. A balcony (called a "gallery") would usually be built on the east, south, and west walls, and a high pulpit would be

located on the north wall. Box pews were provided for families, and single men and women (and slaves) would typically sit in the balconies. Large multi-paned windows would be located at both the ground floor and gallery levels. It was a status symbol to have lots of glass in the windows - glass was expensive and had to be imported from England. A pulpit window, between the levels of the ground floor and gallery windows, would typically be in the center of the north wall. This window is one of the hallmarks of a colonial meetinghouse, and its former location can often be seen in the clapboards of structures that have been modified.

These structures have evolved over the centuries. Most that are still standing have been renovated several times to meet the needs of their owners and the styles of the times. In the early 1800s, people wanted "modern" churches that had one entrance on a short end of the building, a long aisle to a pulpit on the other short end, and slip pews instead of box pews. Since meetinghouses were typically built with the long wall facing the road, it was not at all uncommon to pick up the building and rotate it 90 degrees so that the front door, now on the short end of the building, would face the street. Also, since it took considerable effort to build a new post-and-beam end wall, the need for additional space was often accommodated by cutting the building in half, separating the front and back halves, and filling in the space between them. At this time it was also common to build steeples over the entrances, either incorporated into the building, or as part of an entrance porch that was added to the building's end. Many a typical white New England church started out as a colonial meetinghouse.

An interesting variation to the "make a church" type of renovation took place in several towns when the separation of church and state took place. In these cases, the thrifty New Englanders complied with the law by building a floor at the balcony level, and using the first floor for town business, and the second floor for church. Many meetinghouses thus have a floor at what used to be the balcony level.

Most colonial meetinghouses have been modified beyond recognition. A few, however, have not been substantially changed at all, and are fascinating glimpses into this part of our history.

This Colonial Meetinghouse Project explores these structures. My main interests are the few buildings that look like they did when my Puritan ancestors built them. I feel a sense of mystery when I am in one of these places. I wonder a lot about the people who built and used them, and about the emptiness that is left behind. These buildings are now filled with light and space, and my work attempts not just to document what they look like, but also to convey the feelings of wonder that I have for them.

This project will produce both a book and a traveling exhibition to inform and educate a broad audience about these unique structures and their timeless testament to community life.

A selected list of other books about meetinghouses can be found in the **Bibliography**.